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PAGE 19

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State Dept. Bureau Is Instructed Not to Speak to a Times Reporter

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 27 — The director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs has ordered his staff not to talk to a New York Times correspondent, Leslie H. Gelb, who wrote that the United States had contingency plans for placing nuclear weapons in Canada, Iceland, Bermuda and Puerto Rico.

The official, Lieut. Gen. John T. Chain Jr., said he had issued the order because the article, published in The Times on Feb. 13, included "classified information the release of which is harmful and damaging to the United States."

In a statement, General Chain noted that Mr. Gelb was director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs from 1977 to 1979. "An American, particularly one who has served in a responsible national security position, and thereby knows when classified information is sensitive and should be protected, has a responsibility not to take action which is harmful to U.S. security," the general said.

Photograph Is Removed

At the general's request, a photograph of Mr. Gelb that was hanging in the bureau's waiting room, along with the photographs of other former directors, was removed. A note on the empty frame says the picture was removed "for cause."

Today, Secretary of State George P. Shultz endorsed General Chain's action, according to Bernard Kalb, the department spokesman.

While Mr. Gelb was gathering information from the State Department for the article, Mr. Shultz had asked The Times not to publish it.

The Times told Mr. Shultz then that the issue of security did not arise because much of the information had already been printed in several foreign countries.

Mr. Kalb was asked today whether the Secretary approved of his subordinate's action against Mr. Gelb and, if so, why he had not issued the policy in his own name and made it department-wide. He was also asked whether it was department policy to allow individual officials who were offended by a news report to decide to deny the reporter access to information for other articles.

In reply, Mr. Kalb said, referring to his own bureau: "The State Department deals with the press through the spokesman and his bureau. Beyond that, the policy is that individuals who are heads of bureaus can make their own decisions on how they deal with the press, and if General Chain has come to

the conclusion he has, the Secretary accordingly supports it."

Times Editor Protests

A. M. Rosenthal, executive editor of The Times, protested General Chain's action and said he hoped it would be reversed by higher officials.

Mr. Gelb's article quoted Government officials and documents showing that the contingency plans for "emergency" deployment of nuclear depth charges had been prepared without consulting the governments involved. The article noted that the plans had become a subject of sharp parliamentary debate in Canada and Iceland after they were disclosed in press reports there.

The article noted that Administration officials feared further discussion of the issue would aggravate the problem among some allies that have said they will not allow American ships or planes carrying nuclear weapons to visit bases in their countries.

In keeping with its normal policy, the department declined today to say what parts of the article it believed to be based on classified information and which were drawn from public records.

General Chain, a former Air Force deputy chief of staff for plans and operations, was named head of the politico-military bureau in July. The bureau, with a staff of 120, deals with issues such as weapons treaties with other nations.

Called 'Matter of Principle'

The general's statement said he had taken the step against Mr. Gelb as "a matter of principle." It continued:

"Unfortunately, it has become customary for some newspapers and journalists to print information which they know to be potentially damaging to the U.S. on the pretext that the public has a 'right to know,' or that such information prevents governmental abuse of power. Certainly I do not argue with the right of citizens in a democracy to know what their government's policies and actions are, and to oblige the government to articulate and defend its policies. Neither do I question the right of journalists to probe beyond the bland assurances of good intention on the part of the government, to reveal 'the true story.'

"But neither our citizens nor the press itself is well served by revealing information — which was the case in The New York Times piece — which impacts on our national security capability," the general's statement continued. "In fact, the disclosure of this type of information contributes little to the public's understanding of our nuclear policies and strategies and serves only to aid our potential adversary.

"It may be argued that my response to the article has been extreme, or that there is little to be done about the problem as a whole: If The New York Times and Les Gelb had not published the information, someone else would have. This avoids the question of personal and institutional responsibility and integrity. Faced with the choice between publishing information potentially damaging to the United States or having someone else print the story, each individual can say 'no.'

"Perhaps someone else will go ahead and print the story, but the moral choice of refusing to go along remains. If each journalist faced with the choice takes the higher course, our country would be better served.

"I do respect a free press," the general said. "I have many friends who are journalists and reporters. I have a policy to meet with any reporter who is referred to me or the bureau through Public Affairs. That list has now been narrowed by one."

'Distortion' Laid to General

Mr. Rosenthal, the executive editor of The Times, said: "General Chain's personal and professional attack on Leslie Gelb and The New York Times exhibited a lack of understanding of a free press and an astounding distortion of the facts.

"General Chain surely knows that the story The New York Times published contained no information that had not already been published and debated in the countries named in the story," he said. "The only people from whom this information had been withheld were the American people."

"Far from being a breach of the national security, the story brought the American public into a debate that was going on in Canada and several other countries friendly to the United States. It helps explain the spreading concern by some friendly governments about the possible deployment of nuclear weapons on their territory."

Mr. Rosenthal continued: "General Chain professes to 'respect a free press.' At the same time, he issues orders to forbid a reporter access to information in his office. His action is repugnant to the concept of a free press. It permits individuals in the department to create their own blacklist of journalists.

"We hope this action will be studied and overturned by higher authority in the Government."